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To cite this article: Debbie Watson & Jonathan Robbins (2008) Closing the chasm: reconciling contemporary understandings of learning with the need to formally assess and accredit learners through the assessment of performance, *Research Papers in Education*, 23:3, 315-331, DOI: [10.1080/02671520701755408](https://doi.org/10.1080/02671520701755408)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671520701755408>



Published online: 08 Aug 2008.



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## **Closing the chasm: reconciling contemporary understandings of learning with the need to formally assess and accredit learners through the assessment of performance**

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This article argues that whilst there have been substantial advancements in the ways in which learning is conceptualised, theoretical understandings of assessment, and practices that contribute to meaningful statements of learners' achievements, have not mirrored these changes in certain learning contexts. The authors challenge contemporary methods of educational assessment, particularly for marginalized groups of learners, specifically young people and adults in informal, vocational and professional learning. They critique the assessment and formal accreditation opportunities available to these groups of learners, and emphasise a need for more authentic, learner-friendly methods to encourage their engagement and retention. Drawing on empirical work with three contrasting groups of learners, they outline a theoretical framework for assessing the authentic performances of learners in a range of settings. The assessment of authentic performance is an important but under-reported area of assessment activity, which has the potential to address a number of contemporary criticisms of assessment systems in national and international contexts.

The emphasis on the assessment of performance in this article recognises that informal and vocational learning is inherently social, is mediated by more knowledgeable others and relies on professional judgements as to how good practice is defined, shared and understood within the wider community. The first section sets out this theoretical framework alongside the 'assessment problem', and defines the authors' understanding of 'authentic assessment'. The second section describes the outcomes of an empirical study that aimed to develop processes and rubrics of alternative forms of assessment based on performance. The conclusion proposes some key components of a model for the authentic assessment of performance.

**Keywords:** assessment; performance; praxis; mentoring; reflective practice; supporting learning

### **Learning, knowledge and assessment**

Understandings of learning and of knowledge have developed substantially over the last 30 years, with a distinct shift from the individual towards social, cultural and contextual accounts. Contemporary socio-cultural theories propose that learning is not solely an individual act but is largely a social process and 'situated' in a range of contexts (Brown, Collins, and Duguid 1989; Lave and Wenger 1991). Knowledge does not necessarily reside in individual minds but is co-constructed in the interstices between individuals and others as a result of action and participation (Wenger 1998). Learning is not concerned solely with rote memory of facts (although there may be aspects of some subjects where this is the case) but involves the learner's active engagement in constructing meaning and in 'doing' (practice/performance) something with knowledge. This conceptualisation underpins much teaching and learning in schools, further education and informal learning contexts.

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Research in organisational learning has also focused on the social and cultural processes underpinning ‘knowledge-in-action’ (Tsoukas 2002) and emphasises the importance of how individuals and groups put social and organisational knowledge into practice in highly complex ways. Assessment practices in these contexts have traditionally been a challenge where the tendency has been to assess small aspects of practice in a fragmented way.

Views of knowledge and of learning have traditionally shaped and determined the design of curriculum and assessment methods. Yet despite contemporary theoretical advances, assessment methods have changed little and have not been sufficiently responsive to changes in pedagogy and curriculum, particularly with regard to assessments that contribute to summative judgements of practice or performance.

Summative and formative assessment are, however, clearly long contested terms (James and Pedder 2006). In this article we use the term ‘summative’ to describe those aspects of assessment that make a judgement of performance, competency or ability and that contribute directly to accredited outcomes. Clearly there are some aspects of assessment that have both summative and formative functions, such as practicals, coursework and portfolios. But there is evidence to suggest that many teachers resist operating parallel assessment systems and this has resulted in a polarisation of assessment for formative as opposed to summative purposes, with associated policy prescriptions (Wiliam 2000). Whilst portfolios, practicals and coursework can provide valid assessment data, they have low levels of authenticity as they generally constitute *artefacts* of learning and are abstracted forms of ‘evidence’: they are *representations* of the learning or performance that is possible by a learner and they do not always offer opportunities to ‘see’ the performance in its entirety. Even practical examinations usually entail the production of an artefact (write up, or a manufactured product). There are writers who claim that such artefacts as artworks have validity in conveying and disclosing meanings (Brown 2001) and that claims for increased authenticity in assessment can only be made based on the artistic performance and the artefact of that performance. But in the settings that are explored in this article, in vocational and informal learning, and with the particular focus that is emphasised, the ‘artefact’ is less clearly defined and the ‘performances’ under observation concern interpersonal relationships and complex professional practice.

Currently there is also a substantial movement in assessment related to ‘assessment for learning’, initiated by the works of Black & Wiliam (1998) and continuing with the work of organisations such as the Assessment Reform Group (ARG 1999, 2002), academics and practitioners. Here the focus is not on the nature of an assessment as evidenced in the formative-summative debates, but on the *purposes* of an assessment – that is, whether one engages in an ‘assessment *of* learning, for grading and reporting ... or an assessment *for* learning, where the explicit purpose is to use assessment as part of teaching to promote learning’ (James and Pedder 2006, 109, italics in original).

These debates suggest that there are clear tensions and challenges for assessment practices in the context of changing understandings of learning. England and Wales have a policy backdrop and a qualifications system that, despite acknowledging emergent understandings of learning that are socio-cultural and situated, demands an individualistic assessment culture that is driven by the wider policy remit of target setting, individual performance, and achieving arbitrarily defined ‘standards’. Thus, a genuine dichotomy is apparent: learning and assessment have become divorced from one another. The reasons for this apparent chasm between the knowledge of learning and the practice of assessment methods are complex, and some of the key issues will be outlined below.

### **The assessment problem**

There is a long tradition in national and international contexts of individualistic and competitive approaches to qualifications. As the primary purpose of most summative assessment remains that

of rank ordering candidates for competitive entry into further and higher education, any problems with reliability of results affect the credibility of the assessment, which is usually at high public and political cost. The consequence of this has been an increasing demand for more robust assessments and greater standardisation of processes across all assessments that contribute to qualifications. The downside of this situation has been to jeopardise the validity or authenticity of assessments and consequently to over-emphasise the importance of assessment *of* learning, with the curriculum ‘backwash’ (Nuttall and Goldstein 1986) that this is claimed to cause. In this context, if the focus of an assessment is heavily concerned with producing reliable results then if the subject of the assessment is highly complex (e.g. aspects of professional practice), it may be that only the ‘more easily and reliably assessed parts of a construct are assessed’ (Stobart 2006, 140), such as the ability to perform discrete skills.

Arguably, much of the assessment that occurs in learning settings is ‘illocutionary’ (Wiliam 1997a) and more akin to professional *judgement* than scientific *measurement*. Illocutionary is a term that Wiliam (1997a) has appropriated from linguistics, particularly from the work of Austin (1975). In linguistics, an illocutionary act is defined as a complete speech act made in a typical ‘utterance’ (a natural unit of speech). One party makes these acts to another with the intention of either changing a social reality or influencing a response or performative act. It is the utterance of certain words that defines the performative act of one person to another (such as praise, threats, chastisement, encouragement).

In the context of assessment, illocutionary forms of assessment imply that a more knowledgeable other (usually the teacher) has internalised constructs that exemplify good practice or performance in the field being assessed and he/she can translate these into speech acts that provide useful feedback for learning. This is an informal and expert-led method that is embedded in teaching and learning processes. Unfortunately there are summative assessment processes, particularly in the settings explored here (such as National Vocational Qualifications, or NVQ) that do not reflect this approach, and strive to reduce and fragment learning to easily ‘measurable outcomes’ (Hyland 1994a; Eraut 2001). The result is, arguably, a diminished understanding of knowledge, learning and practice:

All that ultimately matters on NVQ programmes is the collection of evidence to satisfy performance criteria, and this needs to be distinguished sharply from the process of learning and the development of knowledge, skills and understanding. (Hyland 1994b, 257–8)

Alongside this apparent fragmentation of the learning process for the sake of assessment, there have been few attempts in contemporary assessment practices to incorporate understandings of epistemology. Attempting to apply the same forms of reliability to the recall of factual knowledge as to a judgement of performance or practice in work-based settings seems a challenging association to make. The assessed components are markedly different and include propositional and procedural knowledge elements. Edwards (2005) quotes Rommetveit’s work in describing differences between school-based learning which has been essentially concerned with ‘knowledge about’ as opposed to a ‘search for meaning’, which he argues is more characteristic of informal learning settings. The tendency has been to create another dualism of ‘knowledge acquisition and participation’ (Edwards 2005). Whilst these are arbitrary and challenged, and we would argue not neatly packaged into the distinctions between GCSE/GCE and NVQ, as Rommetveit claims, the problem has been that traditional assessment systems have tended to be focused simplistically on either the recall of defined bodies of knowledge (acquisition) or the application of a narrow and limited set of occupational skills (participation) with many of the complexities of the constituent knowledge and learning activities disguised. What is apparently absent from this dichotomy is the opportunity to assess learners for how they put knowledge into practice (as opposed to skills) in creative, authentic and complex ways.

There is a broad consensus (Skidmore, 2003; Tomlinson, 2004; DfES, 2005a; LSC, 2005) that formal assessment systems should encompass provision for accrediting learners for all their achievements, and for an appreciation of vocational practice that uses assessment processes suited to the task and carries equal currency to academic achievements. This consensus contrasts with the traditional situation in which achievements in theoretical pursuits have been accorded higher status (Goldstein and Nuttall 1986).

There have been a number of contemporary attempts to assess learners in this way and across a range of abilities through Records of Achievement (for example, Certificate of Pre-vocational Education [CPVE] and General National Vocational Qualification [GNVQ]), but these initiatives have suffered from lack of equity, resource allocation, credibility and external validation (Butterfield 1990, 25), as well as an apparent lack of political will to ensure their ultimate success. They have also carried no formal recognition in what is a qualifications-driven education system (Butterfield 1990). There is hence an argument for diversity of assessment methods, suitable to the range of purposes that assessment fulfils (Sanders and Horn 1995) or what others have termed 'fit-for-purpose' (Tomlinson 2004, 23; Stobart 2006), yet there are issues of equity and currency. Similarly, despite an apparent need to consider learning and achievement in terms of 'how learners learn', rather than just what they 'know' or whether they 'can do' certain skills (Skidmore 2003), there appears to be a gap in the existing assessment repertoire to allow for this to happen in practice and in a robust and meaningful way for all stakeholders. This observation is echoed by James and Brown (2005), who argue for an understanding of learning outcomes that are more dynamic, shifting and unique and for a:

new methodology for assessment, perhaps drawing more on ethnographic and peer-review approaches in social science, appreciation and connoisseurship in the arts, and advocacy, testimony and judgement in law. (19)

In the context of the learning settings which have been the focus of our own research, there is a need for an assessment methodology that is socially and culturally located, rather than the more 'technological' approaches that currently dominate this field of education (Delandshere 2002). As Delandshere (2002) argues, assessment practices appear to have been developed in a critical vacuum that is 'disconnected from relevant issues of knowledge, power and social organisation' (113).

### **Defining authentic performance**

Performance and authenticity are both overused and often poorly defined terms in education and professional training. Proponents of performance assessment claim that they provide higher authenticity (Meyer 1992) than traditional written assessments and reveal what students can do with knowledge in context (Wiggins 1997, 20). Much work has been done, particularly in the USA, in performance-based learning and assessment with claims to increased authenticity through performance. There, the focus has tended to be on providing learners with practical opportunities to demonstrate characteristics such as physical ability, technical proficiency, or theatrical abilities where the performance 'criteria' can be tightly defined. In this context, there has been a proliferation of state-wide performance-assessment programmes across a number of US states (e.g. Arizona, California, Vermont) to engage learners with higher order thinking and problem-solving skills, but these have proved problematic, with the result that many of these states have since returned to more conventional methods of assessment (Delandshere 2002).

In this context we use the term 'performance' to define the whole area of professional practice or 'praxis' (putting theoretical knowledge into action or practice). Authenticity is concerned with the *genuineness* of an assessment process in making judgements about performance. This

definition extends understandings of validity, as it is concerned not purely with the ability to defend that the assessment is assessing what it claims to, but that the context in which the assessment occurs is also genuine and not *representative* of the everyday realities of those being assessed. This is a criticism that has often been levied at assessment processes in vocational learning where staged assessments are often utilised. We use the term ‘assessment of performance’ to describe the assessment of knowledge and skills in action (both ‘knowledge-in-action’ from an individual perspective, together with ‘organisation-as-theory’ where these impact on the particular learning organisation). This is where authenticity becomes important, as the assessments should be made in the everyday contexts of practice. There are parallels here with research which is attempting to delineate participation from acquisitional learning, and to extend the boundaries of what is commonly understood as participation to include cognitive activity and the creation of knowledge by individuals, within the communities or systems in which they operate (Edwards 2005).

In order to clearly understand definitions of performance it is also important to delineate it from its counterpart, competence. We would argue that an assessment of competence focuses on clearly defined, readily observed behaviours in controlled settings as opposed to performance, which ‘indicates how people will behave when unobserved, in real life, on a day-to-day basis’ (Schuwirth et al 2002, 925). There is some evidence to suggest that competence-based assessment systems such as the NVQ actually involve authentic assessments that are more closely rooted in judgments of performance than competence and, despite the fact that there may be over a thousand separate assessment judgements to be made to determine competency in an NVQ, assessors make far more holistic judgements and then make them ‘fit’ the criteria (Wolf 1995; Greatorex and Shannon 2003). The difference in what is being outlined here is that we start and finish with a holistic judgement of authentic performance utilising only five broad constructs to guide the judgement. This is ‘construct-referenced’ assessment as defined by Wiliam (1997b), where statements of performance ‘merely *exemplify* the kinds of inferences that are warranted’ as opposed to criterion-referenced systems, where the ‘statements collectively *define* the level of performance required’ (4, italics in original), as in competency models.

In a live performance there are added complexities, one of which relates to how we define the boundaries of an individual’s performance. In dance, for example, which is often assessed through graded examinations, the learner is assessed on their individual performance by an examiner who does not interact with them and probably does not know them. There is a level of objective observation which, whilst never entirely objective (as emotions, values and other dispositions filter personal judgements), does allow for a sense of boundary between assessor and learner. Our current work has stretched this interpretation as it involves the expert judgement of learners in authentic practice by more experienced others who cohabit the same praxis space. This has raised a number of pertinent questions relating to such issues as ‘whose performance is being assessed?’

### **Empirical explorations of the assessment problem**

The critique of assessment practices above was exemplified by our attempts to develop appropriate methods of assessment for three groups of learners who are either outside mainstream qualifications and activities or marginalised or disengaged learners. In these groups, particularly, the criticisms of fragmentation of learning and practice, misapplications of traditional understandings of reliability and misunderstandings of the social and cultural contexts of learning have resonance.

Since 2002 we have worked closely with three different groups of learners who were keen to develop processes and rubrics of alternative forms of assessment based on performance. The theoretical propositions that will be made based on these learning contexts have emerged from the experiences of putting assessment processes into practice in informal settings and are thus

iterative and grounded in these experiences. The three contrasting groups pose unique challenges. In brief, the groups were as follows:

- i) 16–19-year-old peer educators on the APAUSE (Added Power and Understanding in Sex Education) sex and relationships education programme based at Exeter University, who work with 14-year-olds in schools to challenge norms and myths surrounding sex and sexual health. The detailed findings from the peer pilot are described in detail in Morgan, Robbins, and Tripp (2004).
- ii) 16–19-year-old young people engaged in two inclusion projects in an inner city in the North West where we were invited by the projects to develop assessment processes to recognise the young people's achievements in terms of interpersonal and personal development as a means of recording 'distance travelled' for exceptionally 'hard-to-reach' learners.
- iii) Development of assessment and accreditation processes based on performance methods for teaching and learning support staff working in a variety of educational settings. It is this project that will be explored in more depth in the following section.

### **Teaching and learning support**

This project began in September 2004, and built on our previous work in the APAUSE and inclusion projects. We aimed to develop performance-based assessment processes and formal accreditation for teaching and learning support assistants (TLSAs)<sup>1</sup> in six schools in a county in the south-west of England. TLSAs were deemed to be marginalised learners who could benefit from alternative assessment and accreditation methodologies that focused directly on their performance or practice for a number of reasons.

In a recent EPPI-centre (Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre) review of literature on the qualifications and training for teaching assistants, Cajkler et al. (2006) report that in recent years there has been a huge increase in the number of teaching assistants in UK classrooms. It is claimed there are currently 147,400 full-time equivalent teaching assistants in schools in England, representing a dramatic rise since 1997, when the figure was 61,300 (DfES 2005b). This expansion can in part be attributed to the *National Agreement on Remodelling the Workforce* (DfES 2003), which set an agenda for further deployment of support staff to 'remodel' the teaching workforce and relieve teachers of routine tasks, and this included taking on greater responsibilities and a wider remit in schools and colleges.

However, NASEN (the National Association of Special Educational Needs) has a growing concern regarding the use of unqualified staff to look after some of the vulnerable children who need well-trained and suitably qualified individuals to help meet their needs (Education and Skills Committee 2006). The apparent lack of qualifications amongst support staff is reflected in a survey conducted by the University of Plymouth and the DfES in 2002, who claim that 39.4% of TLSAs in primary schools and 34.2% in secondary schools have no qualifications relevant to their practice (University of Plymouth/DfES 2002). It is in these contexts of increasing staff numbers and contention over their utilisation that this work has emerged.

### **Methods**

The schools were drawn from areas of rural and urban deprivation and consisted of two secondary schools, three primary schools and an independent special school. The development of assessment materials and processes was owned by a working party ( $n=13$ ) drawn from the schools and comprising a mixture of TLSAs as well as teachers and managers (special educational needs coordinators, behaviour management coordinators, head teachers). Through a form of Delphi

workshop processes with this ‘expert group’, assessment constructs were elicited. Delphi is a methodology for ‘systematically gathering input from relevant experts on a topic’ (De Meyrick 2003, 7) and has its origins in health research from which numerous variants have emerged (Green et al. 1999; De Meyrick 2003). The group was set the problem of answering the question: ‘If a teaching and learning support assistant is “good”, what do we mean?’ In asking this question we were aware of the scepticism of several members of the group who considered it impossible to reach consensus with such a disparate group of educationalists where issues such as gender differences, age, types of school, educational achievements, experience and roles held in schools barely scratched the surface of the individualising variables present in the group. Despite these differences, rigorous adherence to the core principles of Delphi allowed multiple viewpoints to emerge and be interrogated (in terms of construct coherence and naming) in a supportive and professional climate. As a result, core descriptors were proposed. After successive levels of comparative analytical methods drawn from Grounded Theory approaches (Glaser and Strauss 1968), a refined list of what we have called *core assessment constructs* was agreed upon (Appendix 1).

A pilot of assessment processes was undertaken with nine TLSAs from the schools in 2005, and seven members of teaching/managerial staff in schools from the initial working party.<sup>2</sup> Initially, this involved the TLSAs being observed and assessed on their performance on three occasions by a senior member of teaching staff. Through successive meetings and discussions it was agreed that the strength of a community of practice could only be demonstrated if TLSAs were themselves acting as mentor/assessors for their peers and in some cases teacher/managers were replaced by more experienced TLSAs. The assessed TLSAs also kept personal learning journals and used these as a basis of a professional review meeting with their assessor-mentor.

Following the Delphi experience and utilising emergent categories of analysis from the Delphi data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all members of the working party within two weeks of the workshop and a second round after the pilot experience. As the main interests of this study are ‘the conceptual constructions through which the consciousness organises experience into a meaningful entity’ (Antikainen et al. 1996, 19), the interviews aimed to explore and reveal how individual interpretations and meaning-making processes are situated in socio-cultural frameworks.

The interviews were oriented towards constructing a ‘conversation with a purpose’ (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 268). The emphasis was on overtly addressing issues of status and gender in the interviews and attempting to break down some of the traditional barriers between interviewer and interviewee (Fontana and Frey 1994), or what others have described as the ‘social construction of a narrative’ (Ritchie and Rigano 2001, 744). In order to achieve this we organised the first interviews around what we have chosen to call ‘landmarks’. The five landmarks had emerged as core themes in the Delphi workshop and influenced how the interviews were constructed. These data gave rise to slightly adapted landmarks and the interviews were then repeated after the pilot experiences to gain further insights, particularly into their views of the assessment processes and their experiences of the pilot. It is these insights from the second round of interviews that are reported in the following section.

## **Empirical findings**

Analysis of the interview data has revealed six core categories (*role of the TLSA; constructions of support; relationships; empowerment; authenticity; and reflective practice*) that describe discrete areas of outcome and experience for the members of the working party who developed and piloted the methods of assessment based on performance. The following discussion sets out some of the key findings in each of the categories.

***Role of the TLSA***

This category describes a more reflexive understanding of role between teachers, managers and TLSAs as an outcome of the pilot processes. TLSAs reported a greater feeling of place and position within the school community and they described the relevance of their relationship with their mentor in enabling this change. This was in stark contrast to original Delphi and round 1 interview data, where the TLSAs described themselves along two distinct narratives of ‘pondlife’ and ‘knowing one’s place’ (Morgan, Bayliss, and Pratchett 2006):

I am part of that lesson and not just there to sharpen the pencils. (Sarah, secondary TLSA)<sup>3</sup>

This increased awareness of role was particularly noticeable amongst members of teaching staff who had managerial responsibility for TLSAs but reported they did not previously have, or make, the opportunity to see their practice. As one teacher reported:

I am much more aware of what they do and not in my own ‘little shell’ any more! (Chris, secondary teacher)

For another teacher, the reflexive outcomes of this raised awareness of role were also highlighted:

It’s made me more aware of what other people are doing, and being involved with their practice and really getting ideas from each other, and not just me helping Eve – but she’s giving me ideas. (Elizabeth, secondary teacher)

***Constructions of support***

This category relates to the ways in which support is understood by TLSAs and teachers. What has emerged from the data is the sense that ‘social support is something you do, not something you give’ (Taylor et al 1998, cited in Bayliss and Morgan 2006) and that this is differentially understood and practised by TLSAs and teachers. This is an important finding because it supports the assessment framework that has been developed. This focuses on the processes of working with children and other professionals, rather than assessing taught *content* and prescriptions: a focus that is prevalent in existing competence-based models. For many of the TLSAs the act of recording their experiences in a personal journal aided their support of particular pupils as they began to see patterns of behaviour and achievement in the young people with whom they worked:

You think ‘every time I go to that lesson, student B does this. What it is about that lesson ... why do they do that?’ And you go to another lesson and it’s totally different. (Suzy, secondary TLSA)

In a secondary school setting this holistic overview of individual children is something that is hard to achieve, particularly for subject teachers. Yet, there are adults present who see these patterns. For this TLSA, writing down her observations had consolidated her knowledge of this child and made her question the reactions and variations in learning that she experienced. How these insights are then utilised to better support the child in question is something that would have been explored with Suzy’s mentor. This is one of the perceived strengths of this assessment model as it enables participants to confront the question of what do you do about this? How do you better support these children to learn and achieve?

For all of the TLSAs, it was important to be recognised for the job and role they bring to schools in its own right and as something that is separate and complimentary to teaching. There was a consensus amongst the group that the TLSAs involved (and indeed in the six schools more generally) had no aspiration to be teachers, but believed that they made valuable contributions to children’s lives and learning, and that this should have recognition.

### **Relationships**

All of the TLSAs reported improved relationships with the person who worked with them as their mentor and consequently with class teachers and line managers. Much of this improvement was attributed to a shared and increased understanding of roles and duties as described above, as well as to a sense of control over the assessments and observations made of them. One teacher described the teacher–TLSA relationship she observed in the role of mentor as ‘poetry in motion’ (Anne, primary teacher). Several of the TLSAs also reported improved relationships with pupils as their own confidence increased:

I’ve got a lot more popular when I am in lessons and the children listen to me. (Sarah, secondary TLSA)

### **Empowerment**

This category describes the emotive and often personal responses that were made by TLSAs about the outcomes of the pilot for them and their practice. This can be seen in the data in two ways: first the TLSAs reported a greater sense of motivation, job satisfaction and feelings of worth and value within their schools, as one TLSA reported:

I feel very important again. I feel like I have got meaning in my life, I feel happy. Whereas in other jobs you just go there ... here, I know I am making a difference. (Sarah, secondary TLSA)

Another TLSA reported that participating in the project had helped to give her the confidence to apply for promotion within her school:

The whole project has made me sit up and think of my own capabilities – I wouldn’t say I am the most confident of people. (Suzy, secondary TLSA)

Sarah’s mentor further validated the gains in confidence and personal growth that was evident in the group of TLSAs when she commented:

The upside of this project for me has been Sarah. Because of her involvement with this she has grown ... so much ... I mean I just think it’s got to be worth it for that alone. (Andrea, secondary teacher)

Anne, describing her mentee, made similar, yet less striking observations:

In a small kind of way she’s blossomed, she’s not very demonstrative and is less sure of herself. But I think she’s gained a lot from it – she’d be keen to learn more and to receive more training. (Anne, primary teacher)

Second, the TLSAs’ sense of empowerment was voiced through the shared increased understandings of their role, the sense that their contribution in schools was valued and that time was being taken to recognise and validate it in appropriate ways:

I think the positive thing is that somebody’s recognising the job of the TLSA and just trying to show everyone else that we are an important part of the running of colleges and schools. I think this has then passed confidence on to them and made them feel that somebody is recognising what they do, and giving them more importance. (Kathryn, secondary TLSA)

The working party had also been overtly encouraged to develop and work as a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). It was agreed that the model we were developing rested on notions of shared practice, performance and standards amongst a community of practitioners. This sense of community resulted in many of the TLSAs asking to visit and observe colleagues within their own school and in nearby schools. The opportunity to broaden their understandings of their roles across phases and settings had been a revelation for some who could not understand why they had not asked (or been encouraged) to do this previously. In Rose’s case this

was her first opportunity to observe TLSAs in other settings, despite 18 years experience as a practitioner.

### *Authenticity*

In respect of the purpose of this paper, these next two categories are the most relevant to explore as we introduced the assessment of performance in the contexts of:

- a) Linking more appropriately with contemporary understandings of learning; and
- b) Assessing authentic practice or performance rather than the artefacts of practice.

The members of the working party had little positive to say about traditional occupational qualifications (in the main, National Vocational Qualifications or NVQs at levels 2 and 3). However, this is to be expected, as they had volunteered for the project on the basis of their prior experience with NVQs and their disillusionment with them. We were keen to explore why this had occurred: common themes that were raised in respect of NVQ assessment and accreditation methods for TLSAs were:

a) *Too much paperwork:*

A couple of our girls completed NVQs last year, and all I could see was paperwork and statements that had to be signed by different members of staff. (Kathryn, secondary TLSA)

b) *Inauthentic and often retrospective/fabricated assessments:*

In the NVQ they are thinking about what they should write rather than the things they should be doing. I think this is hands on, and they think about the classroom situation, the children in the classroom and the job within the classroom. (Nicola, primary TLSA)

A lot of the things that you were asked for in order to be assessed for the NVQ you could actually manufacture to have the right results. (Eve, secondary TLSA)

This claim is also evidenced in commentaries on candidate's experiences of NVQs:

The potential for learning new skills and developing greater flexibility in the workplace was restricted due to the lack of additional training and the emphasis on candidates 'writing stories' to accredit their existing skills. (Spielhofer 2001, 642)

c) *Time away from the classroom:*

They are out (for NVQ) for two lessons the whole year every Tuesday. Whilst they are out on a course, their children suffer. (Chris, secondary teacher)

d) *Poor outcomes in terms of changed practice:*

I did feel it was really heavy on paperwork and really not much indication of what they could practically do in the classroom. (Elizabeth, secondary teacher)

This view was wholeheartedly supported by the TLSA that Elizabeth works with:

I just thought this is rubbish actually (doing the NVQ). All I am doing here is filling in sheets for the sake of getting the qualification. And actually I'm not learning anything and it's a pain in the bum. (Eve, secondary TLSA)

In comparison, comments about this pilot could not have been more polarised. The concerns expressed about inauthentic NVQ assessment were replaced by comments that focused on the links between doing (performance), learning (in this case through reflection and feedback on direct observation) and changes in practice. Two TLSAs sum up the distinction between this assessment method and their experiences of NVQ:

I think that this project is better (than NVQ) because you're learning every time you go to a lesson. Every time you're observed, the discussions you have are about *what you do*, not *what you would do*. (Suzy, secondary TLSA, emphasis added)

This is more about what the job is – it is alive to it! With an NVQ you can make up things because you may not have a chance to do the things they need ... whereas with this one it is more natural and at the same time it is training all the time which makes you aware of how you are acting and the way you should be with students ... and all you can do is get better! (Sarah, secondary TLSA)

The feelings of increased authenticity were also enhanced by the fact that we have developed this approach on the basis of minimal paperwork and a refocusing of the learner's records towards a personal journal rather than a public portfolio. This point was emphasised by one teacher who claimed:

A lot of our TAs have young children, they do not want to be putting in extra time at home and therefore I would like to see what we are trying to set up here succeed – an accreditation through experience that can be directly observed in the classroom. (Chris, secondary teacher)

### *Reflective practice*

The personal learning journal kept by the TLSAs had specific purposes. The working party had imported notions of 'portfolios' and 'diaries' into the discussions with the TLSAs regarding the assessment design. These are methods of recording that have a history in competence-based models such as the NVQ where learners are encouraged to 'document' or 'evidence' aspects of good practice and anything that demonstrates their ability to match the required competencies or standards. When we introduced the notion of a learning journal we were met with an outcry of responses that focused on comments like, 'We thought this was about performance' or 'That is what you have to do for NVQ; so how is this different?' It took a great deal of time and persuasion on our part to reassure them that the purposes were different, that the journal would provide discussion material for the professional interview, and that it would be personal and private unless they chose to share aspects of it with their mentor. We achieved this by suggesting that what they were doing was more like an art sketchbook or jottings and could be as messy and idiosyncratic as they chose. Despite early resistance, we have seen tangible outcomes from this and all but one of the TLSAs are still maintaining their journal for their own use and without any external imperative.

The use of the journal, combined with a professional interview with their mentor and feedback on their observations, has given rise to a number of reflective processes amongst the TLSAs, and their mentors, which overlap with some of the earlier discussions, but which can be categorised as follows:

- a) Broader insights into what they have achieved in their role;
- b) Encouraging them to ask 'how' and 'why', rather than 'what' questions about their practice, 'where theories are brought to bear on the analysis of past actions' (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2005, 214);
- c) Supporting pupil learning by emphasising patterns;
- d) Greater self-awareness;
- e) Becoming more proactive in their role;
- f) Enabling focused discussions about aspects of practice to take place between them and their mentors.

Whilst there are numerous examples of these in the data, the following quotation captures much of these characteristics of reflection:

I think it's brilliant (my journal)! It makes me think about my job in more depth, what I'd like to be doing throughout the course of the day. Whereas before you don't think about what you do, you just do the job – whatever situation you're faced with you deal with. You help the students. When you come to write a diary it sounds a bit like 'that's all I have achieved today, I have only done 1, 2 and 3'. But if you write down what you've done and think that little more in depth about what you've done, in your various lessons throughout the day, it's quite surprising the amount of things you've actually done. So from a personal point of view it has made me sit up and look at my job in a lot more depth. (Suzy, secondary TLSA)

## Conclusion

This article began with the assertion that assessment methods and theories had become disengaged from contemporary developments in understanding how learning takes place in vocational and work-based settings. What we have tried to demonstrate through reporting the pilot of performance-based assessment processes with TLSAs is one way that this reconciliation can be approached. The outcomes of participating in the pilot have been positive for all the members of the group. The TLSAs reported that their participation in the working party and the pilot had contributed to their increased motivation, sense of worth and value to their schools and a genuine belief that they were making a real contribution to children's lives and learning. The teachers and managers reported positive and observable changes in the practice of the TLSAs with whom they worked. They valued the reflexive relationships and understandings of TLSA roles that had emerged from the processes and they witnessed connections being made between TLSA practice, reflection, learning and a newly emergent professionalism that ultimately contributes to the quality of pupil experience. Whilst some of these gains have been reported of other qualifications and training for teaching assistants (Cajkler et al. 2006), the consistently positive way in which our participants described their experiences was remarkable. Inevitably, some problems were experienced, and should not be downplayed. Teaching people to be reflective is not straightforward, as others have observed (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2005) and the TLSA journals documented varying degrees of reflection. Similarly there were issues related to peer observation and feedback (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2005) which need further exploration, such as the ability to be constructively critical and the role confusion that sometimes arose in being both mentor and assessor (and in some cases line manager). In the next phase of this work we have attempted to address this by responding to the working party's own requests to enable more experienced TLSAs to take on the mentoring and primary assessment role (several already had done). This is a challenging task for some of the people we have been working with who have not been used to having authority in their schools. However, we have begun to induct TLSAs into being mentors initially, with a view that, with training and increased-confidence and experience, they could fulfil the assessor role. In this way we hope to address our own prior criticisms (Morgan, Bayliss, and Pratchett 2006) of the need for a discrete, yet complementary, TLSA community of practice to emerge in educational settings.

In summary, the key components of this model of assessment that have contributed to the successes reported here are:

- a) The observation of authentic performance by more knowledgeable but supportive others who are able to make reliable judgements on performance;
- b) The importance of the right mentor–mentee relationship and the role of a TLSA community of practice in supporting this;
- c) Reflective practice through the use of a private learning journal and the utilisation of this in professional and negotiated interviews.

## Discussion

In an educational context, the purpose of an assessment of performance is to recognise and value achievement, usually, but not always, of an individual. As a process, it is an illocutionary act that results in a statement about achievement. In the research described here, the focus was on the achievement of highly complex personal and interpersonal behaviours, skills and dispositions, where judgements have been achieved through non-intrusive, educationally focused means. The theoretical descriptions of the assessment of performance are, we believe, essential to any debate about educational assessment and are pertinent in the current climate of measurement and performativity. The basic propositions presented have resonance in compulsory settings and are debates currently in evidence in the discussions around formative assessment, particularly amongst the Assessment Reform Group (ARG 2002; Gardner 2006).

Our research supports contemporary standpoints that claim assessment (of the appropriate kind for the learner and organisation) can be a ‘powerful force in supporting learning, and a mechanism for individual empowerment’ (Broadfoot and Black 2004, 22). Assessment as it is described and framed here (through peer observation, feedback and reflection) could make substantial contributions to empowerment through developing individual learners’ potentials across a variety of pursuits (ARG 2002); providing formative and diagnostic feedback that educationalists and students regard; motivating learners through an incremental mastery view of learning (and achievement) and focusing on assessment *for* learning (Black and Wiliam 1998; ARG 2002; Black, Harrison, and Marshall 2004).

The interpretation of assessment we advocate here re-engages with these debates and positions knowledge as ‘knowledge-in-action’ (Tsoukas 2002) and a view of knowledge construction that is social. This is opposed to a traditional view of knowledge as individual acquisition, as apparent in the existing competency, skills-based model in which much of professional and non-compulsory learning is currently situated. In putting knowledge into action with others, people draw upon resources and capabilities that cannot be evidenced or reported through traditional means of assessment. This tacit knowledge is the knowledge of praxis and is at the heart of social relationships and interactions, and fulfilment of individual roles in schools, workplaces and communities. How we carry out our tacit knowledge is also the link between theoretical knowledge, and the ability to actually perform, in practice. As Tsoukas (2002) claims, tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge are not two ends of a continuum but are part of one another and our explicit knowing is always underpinned by tacit assumptions and particulars. Many assessment initiatives have valued the tacit nature, particularly of professional knowing, and there have been numerous attempts to convert, access or reveal the tacit. However as Tsoukas (2002) reminds us:

Tacit knowledge cannot be ‘captured’, ‘translated’ or ‘converted’ but only displayed, manifested in what we do. New knowledge comes about not when the tacit becomes explicit, but when our skilled performance – our praxis – is punctuated in new ways through social interaction. (16)

Knowledge-in-action captures the praxis of individuals in social contexts. Thus, what ‘works’ as good practice in one context may not be appropriate for another context, but that does not imply that knowledge learned in one situation cannot be transferred. Rather, as in the example of the TLSAs discussed, ‘good’ TLSAs bring to bear contextual, situated knowledge that allows them to operate within a school organisation. The skilled TLSAs are those who can transcend organisational boundaries and work in different classes, with different teachers, and who are able to ‘read the situation’ rapidly and adapt their praxis accordingly (Edwards 2005). This points up the need for flexible assessment processes that are contextually specific, and responsive to the changing needs and demands placed upon learners. Such an aspiration relies on the mediation of appropriate professional judgement in deciding whether a particular performance is appropriate as a response to highly localised situations. This depends upon developing appropriate (valid and

reliable) tools of assessment that allow experts to observe, appropriately record, feed back and engage learners in a reflective cycle that encourages the integration of practice and theory in ways that are both authentic and ultimately meaningful.

### Endnote

Since completing the pilot project reported here we have received news from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in England that the submissions that we had made for new performance-based qualifications in ‘Learning Support’ at levels 2 and 3 of the national qualifications framework have been fully approved and accredited (September 2006). The outcome of this is that it is now possible for people working in learning support, in a variety of contexts, to achieve nationally recognised qualifications based on the assessment of their practice and without the recourse to portfolio-based or other written forms of ‘evidence’, as has been described in this article.

### Acknowledgements

We are indebted to the contributions of a number of individuals and institutions, including all those involved in the APAUSE project, as well as the Department of Health who funded the project. Thanks also go to the staff and young people of the ‘Route 43’ and ‘53’ inclusion projects. Third, we would like to acknowledge the funding provided by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for the TLSA project and thank the members of the TLSA working party and their respective schools who have given so generously of their time. Our thanks also go to Kathryn Ecclestone, Bob Burden, Liz Wood, Pete Goff, Janet Draper and William Richardson for their comments on earlier drafts of this article. Finally, we would like to acknowledge the important roles that Glynis Pratchett and Phil Bayliss have played in the TLSA project.

### Notes

1. The term the professional group adopted.
2. An additional three TLSAs joined at the pilot phase and have since stayed with the working party (total  $n=16$ ).
3. The members of the working party have all been given pseudonyms to protect their identity and teachers have not been separately identified by their managerial responsibilities, which would also identify them.

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## Appendix 1

### Learning support

#### *Assessment categories*

##### *Level 2 & 3*

1. *Ethical practice* (e.g. professionalism, child protection, safe practice, using local and family knowledge appropriately, knowing the boundaries, maintaining professional distance, seeking support, confidentiality, SEN issues).
2. *Personal qualities* (e.g. respect, positive attitude, reflective, empathy, passionate about the job, fairness, non-abrasive, use of initiative, multi-tasking, proactive, reliable, sense of humour, approachable, commitment, giving appropriate encouragement).
3. *Communication* (e.g. team work, managing learning, mutual support, working with others, glue, interpersonal qualities, consultative, listening, mediation, alternative forms of communication).
4. *Managing the social and learning environment* (e.g. builds relationships, classroom organisation, work independently, embrace challenge for child, maintaining social harmony, creativity, manages equipment and resources, holding everything together, thinking on feet, understanding purpose of lesson, adapting appropriately, learning alongside child, supporting Individual Education Plans (IEPs), knowledge of education process, bring things alive).
5. *Knowing the learner* (e.g. in-depth knowledge of child and their needs, knowing how to use this knowledge, developing social skills, boosting confidence, raising self-esteem, nurturing and protecting, buffering, appropriate use of humour).